



## Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

1400 South 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue  
Bozeman, MT 59718

June 24, 2014

To: Governor's Office, Tim Baker, State Capitol, Room 204, P.O. Box 200801, Helena, MT 59620-0801  
Environmental Quality Council, State Capitol, Room 106, P.O. Box 201704, Helena, MT 59620-1704  
Dept. of Environmental Quality, Metcalf Building, P.O. Box 200901, Helena, MT 59620-0901  
Dept. of Natural Resources & Conservation, P.O. Box 201601, Helena, MT 59620-1601  
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks:

Director's Office

Parks Division

Lands Section

FWP Commissioners

Fisheries Division

Legal Unit

Wildlife Division

Design & Construction

MT Historical Society, State Historic Preservation Office, P.O. Box 201202, Helena, MT 59620-1202

MT State Parks Association, P.O. Box 699, Billings, MT 59103

MT State Library, 1515 E. Sixth Ave., P.O. Box 201800, Helena, MT 59620

James Jensen, Montana Environmental Information Center, P.O. Box 1184, Helena, MT 59624

Janet Ellis, Montana Audubon Council, P.O. Box 595, Helena, MT 59624

George Ochenski, P.O. Box 689, Helena, MT 59624

Jerry DiMarco, P.O. Box 1571, Bozeman, MT 59771

Montana Wildlife Federation, P.O. Box 1175, Helena, MT 59624

Wayne Hurst, P.O. Box 728, Libby, MT 59923

Jack Jones, 3014 Irene St., Butte, MT 59701

Jack Atcheson, 2309 Hancock Avenue, Butte MT 59701

U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 420 Barrett Street, Dillon, MT 59725

Big Hole Watershed Committee, P.O. at Box 21, Divide, MT 59727, MT 59703

Montana Trout Unlimited, P.O. Box 7186, Missoula, MT 59807

Dan Vermillion, FWP Commissioner, Livingston MT

Earnest and Colleen Bacon, 2215 Fishtrap Creek Road, Wisdom, MT 59761

Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation, 730 N. Montana Street, Dillon, MT 59725-9424

George Grant Chapter of Trout Unlimited, P.O. Box 563, Butte, MT 59703

Skyline Sportsmen, P.O. Box 173, Butte, MT 59703

Anaconda Sportsmen, 2 Cherry, Anaconda, MT 59711

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The enclosed Decision Notice has been prepared for a proposal to introduce golden trout into Foolhen, Rainbow and Upper Lena lakes in the Big Hole River drainage. Foolhen Lake is located in the Alder Creek drainage (near Wise River), Rainbow Lake is located in the Rock Creek drainage (near Glen) and Upper Lena Lake is located in the Big Swamp Creek drainage (near Jackson). Currently Foolhen and Rainbow lakes are stocked on a 4 year rotation with westslope cutthroat trout. Upper Lena Lake has no stocking record but has been reported to have had a rainbow trout fishery. Recent surveys suggest the lake does not currently contain fish. All three lakes would be stocked by packing (backpack or stock) fish into the lakes rather than stocking via aircraft. There are no conservation populations of native westslope cutthroat trout in the drainages proposed for golden trout introduction nor any plans for restoring native species to the mainstem streams. The purpose for golden trout introduction is to provide additional diversity to mountain lake fisheries in the Big Hole River drainage. The current stocking of westslope cutthroat trout into Foolhen and Rainbow lakes would be stopped and changed to golden trout.

A total of 1 formal written comment was received after the comment period had closed but was accepted. Additional verbal comments were received at a public meeting of the George Grant Chapter of Trout Unlimited and at the Skyline Sportsmen meeting and are summarized in the Decision Notice.

It is my decision to proceed with the proposed action of stocking golden trout into the 3 lakes mentioned above.

Questions regarding these Decision Notices should be mailed to:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks  
Golden trout EA  
Attn: Jim Olsen  
1820 Meadowlark Lane  
Butte, MT 59701

Or e-mailed to: [jimolsen@mt.gov](mailto:jimolsen@mt.gov)

Sincerely,



Patrick J. Flowers  
Region Three Supervisor

**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FOR THE STOCKING OF  
GOLDEN TROUT INTO 3 MOUNTAIN LAKES IN THE BIG HOLE  
DRAINAGE  
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT  
DECISION NOTICE**

**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks  
Region Three, Bozeman  
June 11, 2014**

**Proposed Action**

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) is proposing to introduce golden trout into Foolhen, Rainbow and Upper Lena lakes in the Big Hole River drainage. Foolhen Lake is located in the Alder Creek drainage (near Wise River), Rainbow Lake is located in the Rock Creek drainage (near Glen) and Upper Lena Lake is located in the Big Swamp Creek drainage (near Jackson). Currently Foolhen and Rainbow lakes are stocked on a 4 year rotation with westslope cutthroat trout. Upper Lena Lake has no stocking record but has been reported to have had a rainbow trout fishery in the past but is currently fishless. All three lakes would be stocked by packing (backpack or stock) fish into the lakes rather than stocking via aircraft. There are no conservation populations of native westslope cutthroat trout in the drainages proposed for golden trout introduction nor any plans for restoring native species to the mainstem streams. The purpose for golden trout introduction is to provide additional diversity to mountain lake fisheries in the Big Hole River drainage. The current stocking of westslope cutthroat trout into Foolhen and Rainbow lakes would be stopped and changed to golden trout.

**Montana Environmental Policy Act**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess significant potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

Public comments on the proposed project were taken for 30 days (through May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014). The EA was mailed to 27 individuals and groups; legal notice was printed in the Montana Standard (Butte) newspaper. A draft EA was posted on the FWP webpage: <http://fwp.mt.gov/publicnotices/>. No written comments were received during the comment period. One comment was received on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Verbal comments were taken during regular board meetings of the George Grant Chapter of Trout Unlimited and Skyline Sportsmen in Butte and are paraphrased below.

Comment 1 (written comment):

I know it is late for the Golden Trout project but would still like to take the opportunity to reiterate my position that FWP should not be stocking fish – especially non-natives -

anywhere anymore, except for restoration of endangered species. If fisherman want variety, they should just travel to find it. FWP should not be in the business of modifying ecosystems to please resource exploiters. So Alternative 3 seems to be most similar to my position.

Response: Stocking of fish species is a well established fisheries management practice in Montana. While wild trout management (i.e., natural reproduction sustains the fish population) occurs in most rivers and streams and in some lakes and reservoirs, stocking of both native and non-native fish species is vital to the creation and maintenance of many fisheries. Many waters throughout Montana would not have fisheries (i.e., those that do not support natural reproduction) or could not support the level of fish harvest if it were not for stocking. This is particularly true for many mountain lake fisheries that lack adequate spawning habitat. These waters could not sustain a viable fishery if it were not for periodic stocking. Further, these stocked lakes often provide high quality fisheries in mountain lake environments because stocking rates and frequency can be manipulated to match the available food supply and harvest rates leading to larger, more abundant fish. With the exception of Upper Lena Lake which is currently fishless, there should be no additional ecosystem modifications to the lakes golden trout will be introduced to because golden trout are expected to have the same impact as the current stocked westslope cutthroat trout fishery. The impacts in Upper Lena Lake, which is currently fishless but at one time apparently supported a rainbow trout fishery, are expected to be minor.

Comment 2. Paraphrased: With all the emphasis on native species management why are you proposing to introduce a non-native species to these lakes?

Response: FWP is very concerned about native species management, particularly in headwater drainages. The reason for introducing a non-native species in these lakes is to provide additional diversity and opportunity to the mountain lake anglers. FWP took into close consideration the potential impacts to native species when considering these lakes for golden trout introduction. None of the lakes proposed for golden trout introduction have conservation populations of native fish. Further, all are located in drainages with predominantly non-native fisheries. For example, the Big Swamp Creek drainage where Little Lena Lake is located has 3 self-sustaining mountain lake fisheries containing non-native rainbow trout and Yellowstone cutthroat trout. Brook trout dominate the fishery in Big Swamp Creek. Further, the lakes selected for golden trout introduction will not support natural reproduction. Therefore, if a conservation population of native species were discovered in the drainage or if management emphasis was changed, stocking would cease and the fishery would disappear.

FWP is taking extra steps to make sure that golden trout would not be inadvertently stocked into a lake or drainage that is managed for native species. Most stocking of mountain lakes is done by helicopter. These golden trout lakes will be stocked by hand. Fish will be packed into the lakes in backpacks to ensure that the proper water is stocked.

Comment 3. Paraphrased: With declining budgets why is FWP taking on new expenses to stock golden trout into these lakes?

Response: There will be few additional costs associated with stocking golden trout versus the current management of the 3 lake fisheries. Rainbow and Foolhen lakes are



currently managed as stocked westslope cutthroat trout fisheries. They are stocked every 4 years by helicopter from the Washoe Park Hatchery in Anaconda. The change to golden trout management will mean the lakes are no longer stocked by air. The cost to fly the helicopters is approximately \$525/hr. Golden trout eggs are collected every 6 years from the wild brood source in the Beartooth Mountains. These eggs are stocked across Montana in the lakes that are managed for golden trout. These plants are usually done by air, but in the Big Hole lakes the fish will be packed in by fisheries personnel in backpacks as part of their regular duties. It will take more time to introduce the golden trout for fisheries personnel, but the overall costs of the management change to golden trout are likely equal or slightly less than the current westslope cutthroat trout management. Further, FWP hopes to enlist the help of volunteers to stock the golden trout into the lakes which will result in a further costs savings.

Comment 4: Paraphrased: What will the impact of the golden trout be on the existing cutthroat trout fishery?


Response: The golden trout will be stocked while there is still a cutthroat trout fishery in Rainbow and Foolhen lakes. There should be little interaction between the two species. While golden trout and westslope cutthroat trout are capable of hybridizing, the lakes do not support any natural reproduction so hybrids are not expected to occur. The fishery will contain both species until the cutthroat trout eventually age out and are no longer present in the lake.

Comment 5: Paraphrased: I am afraid that use at the lakes will increase as a result of golden trout introduction and that the pristine nature of the lakes may be impacted.

Response: It is possible that golden trout introduction could result in increased use at the lakes because they are a highly sought after species for mountain lake anglers. This will be monitored and if it is determined that impacts to habitat are occurring due to increased use, FWP will reevaluate the management of the lake(s) and determine if golden trout management should be reconsidered.

### **Decision**

Based on the Environmental Assessment, the lack of public comment, and benefits and risks associated with this project, it is my decision to go forward with the proposed action to introduce golden trout to Foolhen, Rainbow and Upper Lena lakes. I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.



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Patrick J. Flowers  
Region Three Supervisor

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